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ABSTRACT

Published for planning and articulation by National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) constituencies, this paper discusses assumptions about learners and teachers, assumptions about knowledge, assumptions about language, and English/language arts practices. Assumptions about learners and teachers discussed in the paper include: every person is a learner; teachers and students are a community of learners; language is the primary medium for teaching, growth, and change; the classroom is an extended community; and the classroom setting contributes to the climate of learning. Assumptions about knowledge in the paper are: knowing is active and ongoing, a process of interactive learning; knowledge is not information, yet it requires information; and knowledge is more than a mastery of facts and processes. Assumptions about language the paper discusses include: language is a vital medium for creating individual and social identities; and students' language is valued and used as a means of learning, change, growth within the classroom. The paper concludes with a list of English/language arts practices which reflect the idea that students should: (1) have guidance and frequent opportunities to read whole texts; (2) read texts by authors of diverse backgrounds; (3) bring their own cultural values, languages, and knowledge to their classroom reading and writing; (4) learn grammar and usage by studying how their own language works in context; (5) have their work assessed by many measures; and (6) have their work shared, displayed, or published. (RS)

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NCTE'S POSITION ON THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH: Assumptions and Practices

Working Paper Developed by the Elementary, Secondary, and College Sections, 1988-89, for Planning and Articulation by Council Constituencies

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LEARNERS AND TEACHERS

Every person is a learner. It is the nature of everyone to learn: to grow and change through interacting with others and responding to experiences. Learning is not confined to school times. It is ongoing and limited only by the sensory and reflective powers of the learner.

Teachers and students are a community of learners. Learning is a collaborative effort. Teachers are learners--from self and others. Learners are teachers of self and others. Through genuine interaction, teacher-learners grow and change. Students and teachers build predictable yet fluid structures for interaction. Teachers listen to and observe students, collecting data from and about them, and use a variety of strategies to engage them in learning.

Teachers respond to students in ways that enable them to explore options, make choices, and participate in meaning-making experiences. Teachers not only bring their expertise and authority to interactions with students, they also precipitate change by nudging and questioning to stimulate thinking and enable students to ask their own questions and seek answers.

Learners are aware of the uniqueness of each other's backgrounds, and value this uniqueness. Learners have diverse backgrounds, which reflect a mosaic of cultural heritages. They bring to their classrooms their different language proficiencies, their learning styles, and their own authority and expertise. The community of learners appreciates these diversities of cultural heritage and socioeconomic background, validating and challenging learners' representations of the world. Every language, culture, and experience is a resource in the classroom.

The community of learners values experience as the stimulus for growth and change. Learning comes from active response, evaluation of ideas and events, interactions with texts, discussion with others, and construction of knowledge. In a learning environment, students are given time to articulate and revise what they know. Teachers structure classrooms so that experiences address their as well as students' interests. They orchestrate experiences within or outside the classroom so that students can call upon these as sources of language use.

Language is the primary medium for teaching, growth, and change. The learning event is a social interaction with language. By communicating, learners articulate and make of learning something that can be reflected upon, becoming conscious and critical about the change in their knowledge.

Teachers and learners assume many roles, often shared, often overlapping, always interdependent and interactive. They respect each other in these roles. Teachers have a repertoire of roles with reflective, authentic stances: mediator, facilitator, and participant. They delicately balance the roles of manager/director and enabler/interactor with individuals, small groups, and the whole class. Teachers provide information and direction, respond thoughtfully to students' efforts, demonstrate appropriate actions and attitudes, and systematically observe students to assess their progress toward desired ends. Teachers are authorities on learning and pedagogy. They are also researchers, working both theoretically and practically. Teachers plan, organize, choose materials and teaching strategies, and set up structured learning environments to foster desired academic and social interactions.

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Teachers are reflective practitioners, aware of the theoretical bases from which they operate, making informed judgments for which they are accountable. In charge of their classroom, they are professionals responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating the process of learning.

Learners are problem solvers and decision makers. Students develop as active learners by participating in planned activities, thinking and questioning, creating, exploring, experimenting, and making choices and decisions.

Learning entails making mistakes in a climate of trust. Students make mistakes in the process of acquiring knowledge and skill. In a climate of trust, learners are valued as those who have much to give, demonstrate, and teach others, thus permitting them to take responsibility for and maintain ownership of their learning. A trusted individual becomes a risk taker. Support for risk taking requires acceptance of error as a part of learning.

The classroom is an extended community. It includes parents, other faculty, staff, specialists, other students, community members, experts, and resource people. It involves the neighborhood and the other overlapping communities to which students belong. The extended classroom--as well as the additional roles students play--yields a vast resource of information and interaction.

The classroom setting contributes to the climate of the learning. The class schedule provides opportunity to reflect on personal and community actions, allowing students and teachers to engage in language activities for real purposes. Uninterrupted time blocks allow for learning, not "just covering." Freedom to use time in a flexible way helps students to become committed to the tasks at hand. The pace of the classroom is determined partly in response to the development and inquiry of the students.

The variety of materials available reflects the diversity of the students. Students have easy access to learning materials of all types, which are organized and accessible to entice and accommodate students. Students are free to choose materials and texts, work in a variety of situations, and interact with all class members in an environment that is predictable but not static, exciting but not chaotic, disciplined but not restrictive.

Assessment reflects what is valued in education. The community of learners uses diverse kinds of assessment, including self-assessment, as opportunities for reflection on individual growth and change. Beyond simple recall of facts, assessment, which is always limited, grows naturally from classroom learning and is an extension of that learning.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT KNOWLEDGE

Knowing is active and ongoing, a process of interactive learning. The classroom is a place where knowledge is socially constructed through interaction among teachers, students, and materials. Knowledge is not neutral, but political, enabling the knower to make choices among conflicting sources.

Knowledge is not information, yet it requires information. Because the world's diverse information base is expanding at a rapid rate, teachers cannot limit their classes to narrow lists of information or sets of readings. Although students use certain resources, they also know that a much larger body of resources exists and that they can gain access to these resources. Individualized, learner-based pedagogy requires that students have access to a variety of texts through libraries and other sources.

Knowledge is more than a mastery of facts and processes. It includes an understanding and use of these facts and processes in historical, social, political, and personal contexts. Students bring substantial knowledge to the classroom. Teachers build on that information.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE

Language is a vital medium for creating individual and social identities. Through language, students make meaning and come to understand and define themselves. Through language, they communicate their sense of the world, function with others, and get things done. Through language, they exercise power over the world.

Students' language is valued and used as a means of learning, change, and growth within the classroom. Students' use of language is a major source of content for the study of language in the classroom. What students write, read, speak, and listen to is what is studied. Paying attention to students' talk about what they are learning, thinking, and feeling, teachers analyze what students can do with language in order to help them learn. Teachers validate students' experiences as sources of language.

The power of language and the rules that it follows are discovered, not invoked. Students know about the power of language to influence. They are able to recognize powerful language and to use it in some contexts. They learn about how language works through systematic analysis of what is said and written. Language instruction is developmental rather than remedial.

Literacy has a wide range of genres and functions, which are important to teachers and learners.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS PRACTICES

In the English/language arts curriculum, students

should have guidance and frequent opportunities to:

1. read whole texts in their original versions, sharing written and oral meanings, not simply supplying workbook answers or responses to predetermined questions

2. read texts by authors of diverse backgrounds: e.g., ethnic, racial, gender, age

3. bring their own cultural values, languages, and knowledge to their classroom reading and writing

4. collaborate in writing many whole texts, not answers to exercises

5. read and write different kinds of texts for different readers: personal essays, informative writing, literature, and persuasive writing

6. Learn grammar and usage by studying how their own language works in context

7. work with teachers and other students as a community of learners, observing their teachers as readers and writers

8. experience the interaction of reading, speaking, listening, and writing as reasoning and communicating acts

9. have their work assessed by many measures:

a. portfolios of their writing

b. extended oral and written responses to reading

c. essay tests with sufficient time for planning and revising, scored by a variety of means: holistic, primary trait, analytic

d. records of reading in class and outside class

e. one-to-one or small group conferences

10. encounter and critique a diversity of print materials--books, signs, posters, brochures, and so forth

11. have their own work shared, displayed, or published

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